



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Singapore

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in some circumstances.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. The Government has banned the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Unification Church. The Government does not tolerate speech or actions that it deems could adversely affect racial or religious harmony.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 270 square miles, and its total population is approximately 4.2 million, of whom 3.5 million are citizens or permanent residents. According to a 2000 government survey, 85 percent of citizens and permanent residents profess some religious faith or belief. Of this group, 51 percent practice Buddhism, Taoism, ancestor worship, or other faiths traditionally associated with the ethnic Chinese population. Approximately 15 percent of the population is Muslim, approximately 15 percent is Christian, and just over 4 percent is Hindu. The remainder is composed of adherents of other religions, agnostics, or atheists. Among Christians, the majority of whom are ethnic Chinese, Protestants outnumber Roman Catholics by slightly more than two to one. There are also small Sikh, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and Jain communities.

Approximately 77 percent of the population is ethnic Chinese, 14 percent ethnic Malay, and 8 percent ethnic Indian. Nearly all ethnic Malays are Muslim, and most ethnic Indians are Hindu. The ethnic Chinese population is divided among Buddhism, Taoism, and Christianity, or is agnostic or atheist.

Foreign missionaries are active in the country and include Roman Catholics, Mormons, and Baptists.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion; however, the Government restricts this right in some circumstances. The Constitution provides that every citizen or person in the country has a constitutional right to profess, practice, or propagate his or her religious belief so long as such activities do not breach any other laws relating to public order, public health, or morality. There is no state religion.

All religious groups are subject to government scrutiny and must be registered legally under the Societies Act. The Government deregistered the Singapore Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses in 1972 and the Unification Church in 1982, making them unlawful societies. Such a designation makes it impossible to maintain a legal identity as a religion, with consequences relating to owning property and conducting financial transactions, or to hold public meetings.

The Government plays an active but limited role in religious affairs. For example, the Government seeks to ensure that citizens, most of whom live in publicly subsidized housing, have ready access to religious organizations traditionally associated with their ethnic groups by helping such institutions find space in these housing complexes. The Government maintains a semi-official relationship with the Muslim community through the Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), which was set up under the Administration of Muslim Law Act. The MUIS advises the Government on concerns of the Muslim community, drafts the approved weekly sermon, regulates some Muslim religious matters, and oversees a mosque building fund financed by voluntary payroll

deductions. The Constitution acknowledges Malay/Muslims as "the indigenous people of Singapore" and charges the Government specifically to promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, cultural, and language interests.

The 1961 Women's Charter gives women, among other rights, the right to own property, conduct trade, and receive divorce settlements. Muslim women enjoy most of the rights and protections of the Women's Charter; however, for the most part, Muslim marriage law falls under the administration of the Muslim Law Act, which empowers the Shari'a court to oversee such matters. The act also allows Muslim men to practice polygyny. Requests to take additional wives may be refused by the Registry of Muslim Marriages, which solicits the views of existing wives and reviews the financial capability of the husband. There were 340 applications for polygynous marriage from 1999 to 2003, of which 109 were approved, representing approximately 0.5 percent of all Muslim marriages during that period.

The Presidential Council on Minority Rights examines all pending bills to ensure that they do not disadvantage a particular group. It also reports to the Government on matters affecting any racial or religious community and investigates complaints.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools.

There is one or more official holiday for each major religion in the country: Hari Raya Haji and Hari Raya Puasa for Muslims, Christmas and Good Friday for Christians, Deepavali for Hindus, and Vesak Day for Buddhists.

In 2003, the Government, in consultation with representatives of all the major faiths and the general public, adopted a Declaration on Religious Harmony to affirm the values seen as necessary for maintaining good relations between the country's religious communities. The Government generally promotes interfaith understanding indirectly by sponsoring activities to promote interethnic harmony. Because the primary ethnic minorities each are predominantly of one faith, government programs to promote ethnic harmony have implications for interfaith relations. For example, the Inter-Racial Confidence Circles were created in 2002 to foster greater interaction and understanding among the different ethnic and religious groups.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Government restricts certain religions by application of the Societies Act. In 1982, the Minister for Home Affairs dissolved the Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, also known as the Unification Church. In 1972, the Government deregistered and banned the Singapore Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses on the grounds that its existence was prejudicial to public welfare and order because its members refuse to perform military service (obligatory for all male citizens), salute the flag, or swear oaths of allegiance to the State. At the time, there were approximately 200 Jehovah's Witnesses in the country; at the end of the period covered by this report, there were approximately 2,000. Although the Court of Appeals in 1996 upheld the rights of members of Jehovah's Witnesses to profess, practice, and propagate their religious belief, and the Government does not arrest members for being believers, the result of deregistration has been to make public meetings of Jehovah's Witnesses illegal. Nevertheless, since the 1996 ruling, no charges have been brought against persons attending or holding Jehovah's Witness meetings in private homes.

The Government can also influence religious practice through the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. The act was passed in 1990, and revised in 2001, in response to actions that the Government viewed as threats to religious harmony. This includes aggressive and "insensitive" proselytizing and "the mixing of religion and politics." The act established the Presidential Council on Religious Harmony, which reports to the Minister of Home Affairs and is empowered to issue restraining orders against leaders and members of religious groups to prevent them from carrying out political activities, "exciting disaffection against" the Government, creating "ill will" between religious groups, or carrying out subversive activities. These orders place individuals on notice that they should not repeat such acts; contravening a restraining order can result in fines of up to \$5,984 (S\$10,000) and up to 2 years' imprisonment for a first offense. The act also prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from it.

In April 2005, two Falun Gong adherents were found guilty of illegal assembly and distribution of video compact disks that had not been certified by the Board of Film Censors. The two women chose to serve a prison sentence rather than pay fines of \$12,092 (S\$20,000) and \$14,510 (S\$24,000), respectively. They were released after a week once their families had paid the fines. The offenses were alleged to have taken place between November 2002 and March 2003. The law mandates police permits for outdoor assemblies of five or more persons and prohibits the distribution of films, including video discs, without a license.

Missionaries, with the exception of members of Jehovah's Witnesses and representatives of the Unification Church, are permitted to work and to publish and distribute religious texts. However, while the Government does not prohibit evangelical activities, in practice it discourages activities that might upset the balance of intercommunal relations. Authorities did not detain any Jehovah's Witnesses for proselytizing during the covered by this report or the previous 12-month period.

The Government has banned all written materials published by the International Bible Students Association and the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, both publishing arms of Jehovah's Witnesses. In practice, this has led to confiscation of Bibles published by the groups, although the Bible itself has not been outlawed. A person in possession of banned literature can be fined up to \$1,176 (S\$2,000) and jailed up to 12 months for a first conviction.

Unlike in the past, there were no government seizures of Jehovah's Witnesses literature during the period covered by this report. In the previous 12-month period, 11 individuals were detained briefly for attempting to bring Jehovah's Witnesses publications into the country from Malaysia, down from 30 cases in 2003. In each instance, the literature was confiscated but no charges were filed.

No Jehovah's Witnesses students were suspended from school for refusing to sing the national anthem or participate in the flag ceremony during the period covered by this report. There were two such suspensions during the previous 12-month period.

Compulsory education began in January 2003. In response to concern from the Malay/Muslim community regarding the fate of madrassahs (Islamic religious schools), the Government has temporarily exempted madrassah students from compulsory school attendance. If madrassahs do not achieve minimum academic standards by 2008, they will no longer be allowed to teach core subjects such as science, mathematics, and English.

At the end of the period covered by this report, there were 16 members of Jehovah's Witnesses incarcerated in the Armed Forces Detention Barracks because they refused to carry out the legal obligation for all male citizens to serve in the Armed Forces. Of these, four began their sentence during the period covered by this report. There were no known conscientious objectors other than members of Jehovah's Witnesses during the period covered by this report. The initial sentence for failure to comply with the military service requirement is 15 months' imprisonment, to which 24 months are added upon a second refusal. Failure to perform annual military reserve duty, which is required of all those who have completed their initial 2-year obligation, results in 40-day sentences; a 12-month sentence is usual after four such refusals. All of the Jehovah's Witnesses in detention were incarcerated for failing to perform their initial National Service obligations and expect to serve a total of 39 months.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Nearly all ethnic Malay citizens are Muslim, and ethnic Malays constitute the great majority of the country's Muslim community. Attitudes held by the Malay and non-Malay communities regarding one another are based on both ethnicity and religion, which in effect are impossible to separate.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The U.S. Embassy maintains contacts with the various religious communities in the country.

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